The Time of Indifference: Mandelstam's Age, Badiou's Event, and Agamben's Contemporary

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Abstract:
There has been little direct discussion between perhaps the two leading philosophers of our age: Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. Yet both men have written about the same poem by Osip Mandelstam, 'The Age', around the topic of time. Significantly, Agamben's response, written after Badiou's, is a subtle and damning critique of Badiou's conceptualisation of time, in particular extended across the categories of the modern, the contemporary, and the *now* or the *event* – although it never actually mentions Badiou by name. In this paper the lens of the central role of indifference in the work of both is used to present alternating and competing views as to the nature of modern, contemporary, and 'now' time. Specifically, a contrast is drawn between Badiou's use of indifference as both quality-neutral and absolutely non-relational, and Agamben's application of the indifferent suspension of the temporal signature as such. The paper concludes that while Badiou uses temporal indifference to question and problematise the idea of modern time as 'now', through a theory of the event, Agamben appears to go further. Rather than analyse the nature of modern time, the contemporary, and the now through his reading of Mandelstam, Agamben uses Mandelstam's poem to suspend the Western conception of time as a line composed of points in its entirety.

Keywords: Agamben, Badiou, Mandelstam, modernism, the contemporary, now, *kairos*, event, indifference.

How does one go about constructing a period, an age, an epoch, or indeed a time, such as one can be said to be in or of that period? We could start by saying that the construction of a period must be in some way dependent on our more general idea of time as such. What is our time, the time we have made, the time we assume to be an intrinsic part not only of our existence but that of the universe as such? Time

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itself is nothing but a construct. Spend enough time in the company of philosophers and you realise that time in Western thought has habitually been presented as both a linear sequence moving forward, sometimes to a conclusion, and a series of points along that line which you can isolate, especially as you live them in terms of their being your now. An extended period of time along that line, which is surely what an age or epoch is, can be understood as a kind of augmented point or a curtailed sequence. This paradox of a wide point or a narrow, punctual sequence will come back to haunt time, and is something I will return to later. Let us take a period to be a series of points that are isolated from the assumed continuity of time and all placed under the same temporal heading, in our case modernism and then the contemporary. An age, then, is a sequence of a sequence, but the overall sequence, time, is of a different order to the named sequence, modern time. Time is presented as a universal and is thus, paradoxically, atemporal, while a period is clearly not universal and so can be easily delimited – or so you might think. A period can be defined as that where the atemporality of pure time becomes closed off and finalised as a historical moment – which is not to say that most theories of universal or atemporal time don't also include within themselves some mode of finality, but that mode involves an eschatological end of all time at odds with the localised nature of a closed period.

A significant moment in the history of our self-conscious responses to time is the period we have chosen, over time, to call modernity. Modernity is, according to Badiou, nothing more than the set of events or statements or texts contained within the set of time we call 'modernity' (Badiou 2007 [2005]: 3). If modernity were a closed-off period of time it is conceivable that we could, say with a great computer and funding from someone wanting to look at so-called big data, work out all the texts of modernity to which we could ascribe the set definition of modernism. The problem is that there is no agreement on when modernism began and when it ended, if indeed it did, and even if there were accord on this matter it is quite clear that modernism as an aesthetic period does not map onto modernity as a philosophical conception, even if modernism seems to be some kind of cultural apotheosis of modernity. Worse, modernism is not just a text or work produced during a period of time; it also tends to typify certain qualities of that period as well. These values are set by us retrospectively, but they should also relate to the self-conscious activity and self-reflection of the artists of that age in terms of what they are doing during their time on this earth. The set *modernism* should then be made up of works produced during modernism in accord with the values of that period and with the wider point that these values represent an end or high point in the period of modernity. Yet at the same time modernism is a retrospective construct. The modern was made later, after the modern was no longer modern, and so it is with all periods. It matters more with the modern, however, because it is intrinsic to the modern that the tricky time of the now be captured therein. This is what we find in Osip Mandelstam's poem, 'The Age', the subject of this paper, a self-conscious work of modernism that is aware of its own temporal categories and the paradoxes they create.[1] How can a period of time be defined by that quality

of aperiodicity that is the basis of the aesthetic of the *now* we call modern? How is it possible for one to define retrospectively a period of time based on the quality of self-consciousness about its own temporality at the time? If all periodisation is essentially a retrospective designation when an era or epoch is closed, and yet you are faced with a period whose very definition is a critical engagement with being in the now, outside of time, without epoch, then surely you are faced with two unappealing possibilities. Either you simply can't define modernism in terms of what it took itself to be, as its relation to time disallows the historical periodisation you are attempting, or if you can define modernism in terms of its temporality of the now, the new and so on, you are not defining modernism at all. Finally, how can you close off the sequence of modernity historically, if modernity is not just a time period, but an aesthetic attitude to time as the *now*, making a fundamental and permanent break with the whole conceptualisation of periods? These are the questions Mandelstam's poem promotes in the minds of the two most important thinkers of our age, Alain Badiou and Giorgio Agamben. Not because they care about the meaning of Mandelstam's poem per se, but because they want to use his poem to justify their own views on modern time, the contemporary and their contesting theories of our age as typified by what I will go on to call the time of indifference.

In 2005 Alain Badiou published a seminar series on the twentieth century under the title *The Century*. It contains in its first pages an archetypal reading of modernism based on Osip Mandelstam's 1923 poem 'Vek Moi', translated usually as 'The Age'. The methodology of Badiou's *The Century* is in some senses primarily literary rather than philosophical. As he says in the first chapter, he is in pursuit of 'the century's uninherited thoughts' (Badiou 2007 [2005]: 3), adding:

> My idea is that we stick as closely as possible to the subjectivities of the century. . . . Our aim is not to judge the century as an objective datum, but rather ask how it has come to be subjectivated. We wish to grasp the century on the basis of its immanent prescriptions; to grasp 'the century' as a category of the century itself. (Badiou 2007 [2005]: 5–6)

Badiou is clear that historically speaking there are several centuries. He names three: the Soviet, the totalitarian, and the democratic. Yet, perhaps flying in the face of contemporary modernism studies, he does not favour a relativistic, multi-temporal, multi-local view of many trans-modernisms. Instead, he favours a single transcendental definition of the century as *evental*, pertaining to the event. Yet Badiou is also clear that he does not want to read the century through Mandelstam as just another example of Being bursting forth as events in the world – his basic model – but rather he wants to listen to the specificities of the century in question and proceed from that, primarily in that the century is a self-conscious element of how the century conceives of itself. This is the paradox we have been struggling with expressed in different means. If you want to define a period first in terms of its own self-image and this self-image pertains to a certain relation to time as aperiodic, non-sequential, ahistorical, perhaps even incoherent, then is there a certain time, in the history of our relation to time, which

cannot be recuperated after the fact? Is modernism the period of the end of all periods, after which all you can say of it is that it was the time when our model of time was no longer operative? Thus, when Badiou says that the century as a whole is defined as *a passion for the real in answer to the question what is life? through the composition of the idea of a new man* (Badiou 2007 [2005]: 32) – his overall summary of modernism – We need to assume he has come to that conclusion inductively by listening to what the artists of the century say about their time, which is why I say it is a literary approach. For this to be the case a passion for the real, the question of life, and the idea of a new man must all somehow arise spontaneously from readings of modern works of art, and only later be tested to see if they accord with Badiou's own philosophy of Being and events.

As we said, Mandelstam's 'The Age' was written in 1923. It predates his arrest in 1934 for an anti-Stalinist poem called, variously, 'The Grinches' Death' or the 'Stalin Epigram', a fidelity to truth that was to cost him his life three years later. The poem is made up of four stanzas which one could say present four topics: the age as a beast that you must look in the face; the symbol of vertebration; the role of art, represented by the image of a flute's binding qualities; and finally a parody of lyrical rebirth, suggesting a beast broken and folded back on itself to such a degree that regeneration is actually impossible. Badiou's reading sticks pretty much to this order although it is actually composed of five main points which he lists in a programmatic fashion.

The first stanza is, according to Badiou, concerned with the biopolitical question of the age: 'What is Life?'

> My age, my beast, who will be able
> To look into your pupils
> And with his own blood glue together
> The vertebrae of two centuries?
> Blood-the-builder gushes
> From the throat of earthly things,
> Only a parasite trembles
> On the threshold of new days. (Cited in Badiou 2007 [2005]: 12)

Specifically here the poet tries to yoke together two non-relational elements of defining the age as a consistent being. On the one hand the century is an age, a period of history; on the other it is given an organic consistency: it is atemporal, animalistic, and natural in essence. Badiou's point here is that the beast-age paradoxically brings together an animality that is aware of its place in history, and a historical epoch primarily concerned with the ahistorical question: what is animal life? Badiou writes:

> Under the twinned words life and history, thought is always related to far more than the individual. It is related to an animality far more powerful than that of the mere human animal. This relationship demands an organic comprehension of what is, a comprehension for the sake of which it may be just to sacrifice the individual. In this respect, the century is that of the human animal, viewed as a partial being transcended by Life. (Badiou 2007 [2005]: 14)

In other words, the century may have to take individual lives to construct a sense of life as a whole. As an aside you need to keep in mind here that animality exceeds historical time as it refers to pure biological existence, yet modern history wants to take hold of the animal within human life. This basic biopolitical contradiction is at the heart of Badiou's reading of the poem.

The second aspect of Badiou's analysis determines the first act of heroism in the poem: being face to face with the beast.

> . . . who will be able
> To look into your pupils
> And with his own blood glue together
> The vertebrae of two centuries? (Cited in Badiou 2007: 12)

Here the person in question must remove themselves from their epoch so as to see the epoch. For Badiou this leads to the powerful counter-narrative to vitalism in the age, that of voluntarism or Nietzschean will. While the predominant view of history at the time is deterministic, particularly in Soviet Russia, the project of the new over-man is that history will be resisted and forced to behave. As Badiou says,

> History is a huge and powerful beast hanging over us yet we must endure its leaden gaze, forcing it to serve us. The problem of the poem, which is also the problem of the century, lies in the link between vitalism and voluntarism . . . . (Badiou 2007 [2005]: 15)

Or life and will. This leads to a heroic incompatibility at the heart of the age between the theme of life / history as fated and ignorant of the needs of the individual, and the individual's role in standing up to this determinism. The subjectivity of the age however is not individualism in the face of totalitarianism, which is typical of what Badiou disparagingly calls our contemporary democratic materialism. Rather, it is produced out of the disparity *between* vitalism and voluntarism, the animal and the human. This is what Agamben will call an indifferential suspension – it isn't possible to work out if the age is animal or human, so the age is perhaps the suspension of the age-old differentiation between animal and human life. Precisely this argument is evident across the pages of his famous work *Homo Sacer*, a book Badiou knows well.

The following three elements of the analysis of the poem then develop in relation to this central problem of what Badiou calls, after Deleuze, a disjunctive synthesis or a dialectic that does not result in synthesis. Another way to term this is as a non-relational opposition, a differentiation of elements so different to each other that they share nothing in common, cannot be related and so are what Badiou would conceive of as in-differently different (2005: 67). By this he means different beyond the concept of relational or comparative difference. Badiou names the three elements of this disjunctive synthesis as vertebration, the break with the past, and the role of art. Famously, the poem plays with multiple ideas of vertebration: as heavy ('A creature, as long as it has enough life / Must carry its backbone'), as delicate ('And

a wave plays / With the invisible vertebration'), as broken ('But your backbone is broken, / My beautiful, pitiful age'), and as folded back on itself ('And with a senseless smile / You look backward, cruel and weak') (cited in Badiou 2007 [2005]: 12–13). Yet philosophically, for Badiou, the vertebra of the century is an image of nothing other than its consistency as a set: what holds it together as a definable object in terms of its named events under the transcendental maximal object 'The Century'. In keeping with disjunctive synthesis, this consistency is self-contradictory in that it is substantial, yet easy to break, and in fact is always already broken or consistently inconsistent. Primarily, what this theme shows is the problem of commencement and finality in an age whose subjective being is defined as a disjunctive synthesis between vitalism and voluntarism, both of which escape historical sequential causality – life is atemporal, voluntarism escapes history so as to resist it – yet both of which are seen as typical of an age. For Badiou this poses the problem of having a world-set defined by a transcendental quality that all objects of the set share in common, their consistency, which is precisely the quality of radical disjuncture, breaks, and inconsistency. If he wishes to find events within this set of inconsistencies, then the event must be of another order of inconsistency. In other words, in the set of the aesthetics of the modern of the now, the event cannot be of the now.

The fourth point is directly related to this, as it concerns the possibility, or not, of linking this age to the one which precedes it.

> And with a senseless smile
> You look backward, cruel and weak,
> Like a beast, once supple
> At the tracks of your own paws. (Cited in Badiou 2007 [2005]: 13)

Badiou notes that two contesting views are in play here. Either the twentieth century is a form of 'ideal finality' finishing off nineteenth century ideas, or it is a 'negative discontinuity' renouncing everything that went before (2007 [2005]: 19). One can see here that the logic dictates that the actual relation between the centuries is the non-relation between vitalistic historical determinism and voluntaristic vital discontinuity. Remember: non-relational means non-comparative in-differentiation.

Badiou now closes with a theme that recurs often in his work when he speaks of poetry, the function of art, and the role of the poet in relation to the event. Specifically, here he says that Mandelstam's is a poetry of the modern 'now', but a poetics of the 'wait'. Waiting in anticipation for events is one of the significant subject positions that he tends to ascribe to the great writers of modernism. Badiou's extensive work on Beckett also accords him the same properties of attendance and expectation of the event.[2] Poets of the wait tend to be committed to projects of ascesis, of minimality, of clearing the ground in preparation for something new. In terms of Mandelstam's *menopoiesis*, his poetics of waiting, Badiou notes that in pausing rather than acting – which I take to be the difference between the time of the wait and the time of the now – the great Russian maintains the open threshold between vitalism and

voluntarism. If the modern age is defined, according to Badiou after Nietzsche, by a paradoxical conflict between the power of life and that of will to resist the fatalism of pure life so that a man can impose his will on the forces of nature and history (Badiou, *The Century*, 13–4), the true modern is not to be found as a celebrant of pure or bare life, as Agamben terms it, bowing to the dehumanising forces of pure nature. Nor are they singular men of pure will, resisting the dictates of biological determinism through pure acts of its willed refusal. Instead, the real heroes of the modern are those, like Mandelstam, like Beckett, who refuse to throw in their lot disastrously with either a neutral and dehumanised philosophy of life, or an overly singular and alienated philosophy of pure will. The poetics of the wait is that which, for Badiou, constitutes the actual passion for the real, another name for the event. He differentiates this from a false passion in the form of violence, destruction, and terror, concluding that modernism was 'the century of the poetics of the wait, a poetics of the threshold' that will 'not have been crossed, but its maintenance will have constituted the power of the poem' (2007 [2005]: 22). This is actually something Agamben could say, as his work is dominated by the image of the threshold of indistinction between two opposing concepts such that their opposition is rendered indifferent and so inoperative. What this shows is how hard Badiou has to work to de-couple the event of the modern from the idea of the now typical of the set 'the modern age'.

We should pay attention to the accuracy of the reasoning here. It is not the case that Nietzschean voluntarism constitutes the passion for the real around the question 'What is life?', by, say, facing up to the beast, *vitalism*, and resisting it, *voluntarism*. Rather, the poetics of the threshold is keeping open the inconsistent disjunction or non-relation, between the real, which here stands for Being-as-void in Badiou's philosophy, and one's passion for the real in the form of its events, which is not represented by destruction but by subjective fidelity and subtraction: not Stalin but Mandelstam. In another register, therefore, subjectivity only comes to those who keep faith with the event as the disjuncture between total determinism and subsequent voluntarism. We have already shown how this threshold is in-differently different as it concerns non-relational difference, and also how the aesthetics of the wait is about suspending traditional dialectical differences – here vitalism versus voluntarism – in a state of indistinct indifference. This is the poetics and temporality of the event of all Being for Badiou: just after the void, just before being named. It is a time of indifference.

From this reading we can project across the whole of *The Century* the maxim that the event as radically non-relational to determinism or voluntarism is the answer to the question: What is life? For Badiou, against Agamben who also writes extensively about biopolitics, the *contemporary* conception of life is 'animal humanism' and its terrible maxim is 'Live without ideas' (2007 [2005]: 177–8). In contrast, Badiou contends, we can learn from the modernists to avoid the idea that the new man must be founded on violent inhumanism: the beast. This is a destructive passion for the real which Badiou rejects. Rather we should commence with the inhuman as such, the indifferent void of the real, and from that construct a new human being: 'that of a formalized

in-humanism' (Badiou 2007: 178). I call the void indifferent here because it contains no qualities in Badiou's work that could allow us to comparatively differentiate it from what is not the void, and this means that again it is in-differently different: so non-relational that its difference cannot be established comparatively with anything that actually exists in the world.[3]

We have introduced the theory of indifference as we have gone along, so now let us revise that concept and its relation to Badiou's conception of time as event. An event occurs, according to *Logics of Worlds* (2009 [2006]), in a world where identity is determined by comparing relational differences between things in that world. All worlds, Badiou proves, depend on change and on difference. Things can always be added to worlds, by being a new thing that is defined as part of a world but different to the other parts through relational comparison of the new thing to those things that already exist in the world. This being the case, no truly new thing can happen, because change, difference, novelty, and so on all belong to the nature of every world. So, how do you know if an event has taken place and can one even take place? If an event occurs and you can say it is new because it is different to all the other elements of the world, it is not an event because it is relational and events are non-relational. For events to be singular they cannot relate to anything that exists, so they are always in-differently different. In addition, if an event had certain specific qualities, then these would be knowable because you could compare them to the qualities of other things, at which point the event would be relational, not non-relational. So all events must be quality-neutral, which is another way of saying indifferent. Time, then, as a form of radical interruption of an event into the sequence of worlds, is, for Badiou, in-differently different. By this I mean that such a time is so non-relationally different you cannot even say it is different. This is a quality Badiou speaks of in particular as regards being as void in *Being and Event* (2007 [1988]). Such non-relationality means that the element in question cannot be differentiated from other elements because it is simply impossible to compare it to those other elements – difference being defined in the first instance as $A \neq B$, where you are able to differentiate A from B due to their relative and comparative difference. In the same way time is also quality-indifferent, the other significant use of indifference to be found in the use of set theory in *Being and Event*; it can only be non-relational if it contains no specific qualities whatsoever, at least when it occurs.[4]

In modernism, the danger is to take the consistent definition of modernism's self-consciousness as the basis for the event of the modern. What the moderns say about themselves is what marks them out as truly original and singular. This is a particular problem in that what moderns say of themselves is that they are poets of the now: because the event resembles the now, in terms of its being a point in time, and it resembles the aesthetics of the now because the role of the event is to disrupt everything that went before so as to start anew. However, falling into the trap of defining the modern event as the dialectic between vital life and voluntary, individual human will runs the risk of justifying acts of human will which destroy human lives in

a passion for the real as a pure event. Instead, the event is not the inhuman violence of the real. That is actually a cliché of states and power, meaning, sadly, there is nothing new about that. Instead, the event is a passion for the inhuman as that which is totally non-relational to the idea of the human as it has been constructed in the modern age, as a dialectic of vital and voluntaristic energies. A modern event must be non-relational to modernism's self-consciousness in relation to the now. For this, the event must be temporally indifferent, have nothing in common with the ahistorical nature of life, nor have anything in common with the trans-historical voluntarism of the will of the over-man. Based on these comments and a wider reading of Badiou's conception of being and event, we can conclude that the uninherited thoughts of the modern age suggest that it is an age of indifference due to the double indifference of the event to vitalism and voluntarism – the event is non-relationally and thus in-differently different, and it is quality-indifferent. Yet if, as Badiou actually concludes, the event of waiting keeps open a threshold between vitalism and voluntarism (2007 [2005]: 21), it sounds like he is agreeing with his old friend Giorgio Agamben. Could this be the case?

Although Badiou has said he is Agamben's friend, in a note to *Logics of World* Badiou presents a view of Agamben that drips with condescension, effectively writing his friend off as a 'Franciscan of ontology' committed to a debilitated being of weakness (2009 [2006]: 558–9). Was Agamben aware of this aggressive and dismissive critique when he presented his alternate reading of Mandelstam's 'The Age' in the 2008 essay, 'What is the Contemporary?' Almost certainly yes, as much of the essay is an oblique yet consistent criticism of Badiou, which never once mentions Badiou's name. Before turning to that, however, it is worth noting the dating of the piece. In 2008 Agamben publishes possibly his most important work, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, where he names and defines his controversial method as 'philosophical archaeology' (2009a [2008]: 81–112). 'What is the Contemporary?', published in the same year, is nothing other than a summary and application of Agamben's named method. This method consists of tracing the origins of large-scale concepts back to the moment when they first became operative as modes of organising and legitimising discourse through Foucauldian intelligibility. That said, these moments of arising, as he calls them, are not historical data in the usual sense but, inspired by Benjaminian 'now-time', they actually say as much about us as contemporaries as they do about historical origins. Thus every contemporary moment is founded on an origin or *arche*, yet every *arche* is constructed by our contemporary discourse. Thus the past only lives in the present; yet the present is constantly a construct of the past. In this way time is marked by an essential double anachronism: of past things projected forward into the present and the present as a construct of the past. Revealing this historical paradox at the basis of large-scale concepts such as power, being, secularisation, language, and so on is Agamben's aim, so as to show them as logically unworkable. The past, or temporal common, is founded on the present or temporal proper; yet the present founds the past through its attempts to access it as origin. Thus take any concept, here for example time as such, and you reveal the paradox between a past found, even created, by the present

and a present founded on the past, allowing you to suspend or make indifferent a clear separation between origins and current examples, subsequently freeing yourself of the discursive control of the said concept. It is Foucault with a happy ending. It is also Badiou's set theory reconfigured as historically rather than ontologically based.

Returning to the detail of the text, its other purpose – not just to present Agamben's method but to undermine Badiou's contesting view of a temporality of the event – comes to the fore immediately. For example, like Badiou, Agamben starts by invoking Nietzsche's over-man although it is his untimeliness rather than his voluntarism that attracts the great Italian thinker:

> Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. . . .
>
> Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it . . . *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. (2009b [2006]: 40–1)

In contrast to this figure – and this is Agamben's take on Mandelstam's poem – is the person who coincides too well with an epoch and thus cannot be 'contemporary' as they are unable to see their age as if from the outside. This exteriority facilitating self-consciousness is something both thinkers dwell on. However, note how Agamben adds the quality of anachronism to that of Badiou's disjunction, as this simple addition is the fault from which a chasm separating the two will eventually open.

Aside from the word *anachronism*, this first salvo across the bows of Badiou's vast hulk seems actually to draw the two men together. Badiou also sees the Nietzschean over-man as essential to the subjectivity of the century because 'he identified the main dialectic between life and will' (2007 [2005]: 16), which as we saw is the basis of the century's subjectivity of disjunctive synthesis. Similarly, both men identify that the essence of the temporal is precisely to be found in an intensive disjuncture between a view of time as successive yet deterministically end-directed, and the apparently modern idea of time as the punctuality of the now. As both men show, modernism is not actually the subjectivity of the now per se, but the process of disjuncture between opposing views of temporal continuity and discontinuity. In *The Time That Remains* (2005 [2000]), Agamben names these two contesting times as *chronos* and *eschaton*, developing his version of the time of the now, *kairos*, as that which is to be found internal to temporality as a whole as a disjunctive means of suspending the conception of temporality in its historical entirety. This is due to a basic logical paradox of how we conceive of time as both a linear sequence and a sequence of non-linear points. Time is both a line made up of points and a series of points placed along a line; yet the topography of line and the point are radically at odds with each other. The line suffers from having no point of commencement or conclusion, and of actually not existing as it is only a line because it is made up of more than one point. The point fails to find a minimum point below which it is no longer subdivisible, and we are all aware of the paradox of the now as always already past and projected into the future. So points don't

actually exist either. There is no point that is made up of only one element and there is no time of the point, because the time of the now found on the line is negated by the logic of the sequential nature of the line.

Again *kairos* and Badiou's event seem very similar in this regard. It is surprising then that when Agamben finally turns to his reading of Mandelstam, without ever mentioning Badiou, he immediately corrects his friend using a philological observation that the title of 'The Age' is contested and that the poem is not a reflection of *the* age but *my* age, *vek* moi (2009b [2008]: 41–2). Following this theme, he reconsiders the relation of the poet to the age and argues that the disjuncture here is not epochal or purely epochal, but that the disjuncture between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, assumed by Badiou and others as central, must be placed alongside a second more powerful fracture, that between the poet's personal experience of the age and the historical view of the age. He reminds us that the word *siècle* originates from *saeculum* or a period of a person's life (Agamben 2009b [2008]: 42). Remember, he adds, that everyone is contemporary to their age and while for us the poem is apparently a powerful document about the modern age, for Mandelstam it was actually a work about his contemporariness. This being the case, he argues, the fracture in the poem is actually constituted by the poet, asking us to think again about Badiou's idea of the poet passively occupying the threshold of the wait. Certainly both men are agreeing that subjectivity here is constituted out of a disjunctive moment, but from this point on we cannot be ignorant of the fact that Agamben makes no real mention of modernism in his essay, so that the same subject process gives birth to two very different temporal periods: the modern for Badiou typified as the event, and for Agamben the contemporary.

In the second section of Agamben's analysis he then considers the nature of what a contemporary actually sees of his age in the famous Mandelstam trope of the face-to-face. One would presume that the distance of the contemporary allows them to see their age as if from the outside, with greater, godlike clarity, but such an Enlightenment model is not the order of things here. Agamben argues for example that the contemporary steps out of their age only in order to see the darkness therein. This is an essential point which again ties his ideas very closely to those of Badiou. Agamben uses here a scientific paradigm to explain that darkness is actually perceived by the eye. It is not privative therefore,

> not a form of inertia or of passivity, but rather implies an activity and a singular ability. In our case, this ability amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, which is not, however, separable from those lights (Agamben 2009b [2008]: 45).

This darkness is both the false nature of the *arche* as real origin (the present hides the past in making it in its own image), but also the inability to view one's own age outside of the filters of the discourse of our own age's intelligibility (the past or our discursive history hides the potentiality of our present age from us).

Perhaps inspired by a particularly powerful couplet in 'The Age', 'Only a parasite trembles / On the threshold of new days' (cited in Badiou 2007 [2005]: 12), like a good little leech or cadger Agamben has occupied Badiou's thorax – for it is Badiou who states that the event in any situation is the indiscernible yet very real inexistent without which the light, for Badiou a situation conceived of as a state within the world, is inconceivable. And having penetrated his hide, the parasite has laid his eggs inside, performing a cruel ventriloquism, for Badiou would not concede that obscurity is inseparable from the light; in fact the event as initially indiscernible is radically separated as the totally indifferent non-relational to what there is. This perverse parasitic occupation proceeds apace in the next section, where again Agamben seems to speak as Badiou yet makes him say something very different. Considering the quality of the contemporary as being disjoined from one's age so that one can see the obscurity in the age that is always attached to the light, already a small but significant departure from Badiou, Agamben then says how rare such a subject is – also Badiou's position. This rarity means that to be contemporary is a question of *courage*, a word Badiou regularly applies to the subject. Yet here courage is the result of a process of seeing that is now diametrically opposed to Badiou. Agamben says courage means:

> [B]eing able not only to firmly fix your gaze on the darkness of the epoch, but also to perceive in this darkness a light that, while directed towards us, infinitely distances itself from us . . . like being on time for an appointment one cannot but miss. (Agamben 2009b [2008]: 46)

This is a clear parody of Badiou's confidence in relation to the event, for the subject's relation to the event is always belated: after the fact, basically a historical construct due to the power of retrospective naming. In this way, the event is not particularly different from the overall process of epoch-making that we assumed it would be able to disrupt.

Agamben closes this subtle assault with violence. After all, parasitism often ends with the destruction of the host, breaking the consistency of Badiou's reading and folding darkness and light, disjunction and universality, back on to each other. This results finally in a clear differentiation between modern time as the event, and the time of the modern as contemporary in the poetry of Mandelstam. For Agamben, Mandelstam is not speaking of the twentieth century or the modern per se, but rather of larger concerns, in particular time in general. While, he suggests, Badiou thinks of the event as the disjuncture in time between finality and the instant, Agamben hints here that the contemporary is not a temporal interruption, but an interruption of the idea of the temporal. He says of contemporariness that it is something that 'does not simply take place in chronological time: it is something that, working within chronological time, urges, presses, and transforms it. And this urgency is the untimeliness, the anachronism that permits us to grasp our time. . . .' (2009b [2008]: 47). The egg of anachronism is finally hatched in the belly of time itself, transforming it into an entirely different animal.

This point refers, I think, directly to Badiou's misreading of Agamben's temporality in *Logics of Worlds* as a 'trembling messianism' (Badiou 2009 [2006]: 559). Actually, for Agamben the contemporary suspends time as a category precisely by occurring as a suspensive indifferentiation between chronological time as made up of successive units, for example instants or events, and eschatological time as the messianic ending of time into eternity.[5] Think about this in terms of Badiou's event and you can see that Agamben is directly attacking the evental or unit-based nature of the event as interruption of sequence, *and* the subsequence of truth as installation of the eternal. For Badiou, the truths of events which are initially punctual become at that moment universal. So events are atemporal points that become trans-temporal truths. This, for Agamben, is actually a rather orthodox and problematic description of time. For him the contemporary is that which suspends the opposition between time as universal and as instant, which is the basic metaphysics of time for the West since the Greeks, whereas for Badiou the event is what takes the instant as the basis for the universal: events create truths. Badiou's temporality leaves time untouched as a non-dialectical opposition. Agamben's suspends time in its entirety by making time touch itself as mere historical construction. Basically, for Agamben, time is just a term while for Badiou it is a truthful idea.

The closing sections of the essay home in on a now clear difference between Badiou and Agamben as regards what constitutes Mandelstam's poetic subjectivity as exemplary or not of a period of time which could be modernism or the contemporary. If, for Badiou, the time of the event occurs outside of time, thus leaving temporality untouched, for Agamben it occurs within history, transforming time as history, our paradigm of temporality, from within. Thus Badiou's reading of Mandelstam is as a modern poet of the event as the truth of the age's passion for the real. In contrast, for Agamben Mandelstam is a contemporary poet within his age, revealing what there is within that age that resists the dialectical scission of the modern. If for Badiou the age is defined by, as he says, a scission that is not dialectical and thus remains a disjunctive synthesis, for Agamben modernism is an opportunity to suspend scission in its entirety and create a new time from within and out of the disjunctures of history. This is what he means by temporal indifference, the suspending of the signature or category of time as based on the age-old dialectic of difference between time as continuity and time as point or final moment.

Across these two texts we have then two contesting readings of Mandelstam: of the modern or contemporary age, and finally of the indifference of time as such. As the real is being-as-void then in fact the defining quality of the age is passion for indifference defined as non-relational quality-neutrality. In contrast, for Agamben Mandelstam is not exactly a modern but a contemporary of his age, which we have elected to cite subsequently as modernism. As such the message of 'Vek Moi' is not the interruption of one's time through the suspension of the dialectic between vitalism and voluntarism, as Badiou says, but a suspension of time as such. For Badiou the time of indifference is the means by which the event as radically non-relational to everything in the world

produces a radical change within that world. For Agamben, the time of indifference is the suspending of the assumed oppositional difference in our signatory concept of time between time as sequence and as point of conclusion. For Badiou the indifference of the now or the event is its profound non-relationality. For Agamben the indifference of the *kairos* is how it suspends the difference between time as sequence and time as finality in such a way that the very category of time that we have operated under in the West for more than two millennia – time is a line moving to a conclusion made up of points along that line – is rendered indifferent and thus inoperative.[6]

Agamben suspends the metaphysics of time from the inside through the parasitic application of philosophical archaeological anachronism, suspending the clear difference between time as succession and as finality. Whereas Badiou interrupts the temporal dialectic of succession and finality by introducing a disjunctive event from the outside, the non-relational void, that is out of time, for all time. Which prophecy will find its future fulfilment; whose time of indifference is the right one? At this present time, I cannot say. I am but the precursor caught, like we all are, in a powerful moment of contemporary philosophical indifferentism. Agamben's suspensive indifference or Badiou's passion of indifferent being: I simply cannot choose and so I leave the final words to Mandelstam, someone at least who knew what to choose and how to do it: 'Where to start? / Everything cracks and shakes. / The air trembles with similes. / No one word's better than another. . . ' (Mandelstam 2004: 45).

Notes

1. The version of the poem I am analysing initially is that of Steven Broyde, chosen by Badiou's translator Alberto Toscano. For a detailed consideration of this choice, alternative versions and the implications see Toscano's commentary in Badiou, *The Century* (2007 [2005]: 218–20). Issues of translation will become pointed when Agamben questions the translation of 'Vek Moi' in his analysis of the piece. For the record, the full English version of the poem is to be found in *The Century* (12–13).
2. See Badiou's *On Beckett* (2003a) for his presentation of Beckett as a poet of the wait. See Badiou's *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1999 [1992]: 74–7) for his dialectical presentation of the two kinds of poet, those of lack and those of excess. Poets of lack are those of the wait, of *ascesis*.
3. This is the basis of my reading of Badiou's *Being and Event* presented in my forthcoming work *Badiou and Indifferent Being*.
4. Quality-indifference is a central tenet of set theory. A multiple is defined as part of a set simply because it is included in that set. Other multiples in that set are similarly defined simply in terms of belonging to the set. The relative properties, qualities, or predicates of the multiples bound together in the same set are irrelevant to their belonging, meaning that when a multiple is counted as one of a set it is taken to be quality neutral or indifferent. For the record, belonging to set X is not a quality but a function or operation.
5. This is my reading of Agamben's main treatise on time, *The Time That Remains* (2005 [2000]). It is a dispute over readings of St Paul in that work and in Badiou's *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003b [1997]) that forms the first round of the two-part skirmish between the two great friends and thinkers which Agamben's essay attempts to complete. For a detailed reading of Agamben's conception of time in terms of indifference, see my *Agamben and Indifference (2014*: 81–2).
6. Here I refer to Agamben's reappropriation of the time of now as *kairos* in *The Time That Remains* (2005 [2000]: 68–72).

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